

Sunday, February 6, 2011: 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

## **It was not Paul's worldly status and gifts that resulted in Corinthian faithfulness, but his weakness.**

by [Scott D. Anderson](#) in the [January 25, 2011](#) issue

Recently representatives of Wisconsin Governor-elect Scott Walker asked me to assist with the Governor's Inaugural Prayer Breakfast in Madison. Walker, a young, dynamic conservative Republican and Christian evangelical who is the son of a Baptist minister, was swept into office last November in the anti-incumbent tidal wave that hit most of the nation. Wisconsin became one of several states to flip from blue to bright red overnight.

Walker's religious and ideological pedigree made his request seem odd if not downright shocking. The Wisconsin Council of Churches, which I direct, represents a broad swath of our state's mainline Protestant and Orthodox communions. There is nary a conservative evangelical among us; furthermore, it's no secret that the council has been at odds with Republican leaders in the statehouse on a number of issues through the years.

I'm not sure why the governor-elect's staff called me. Maybe the Wisconsin Council of Churches was the choice of last resort, after others had turned Walker down. Perhaps we had some measure of statewide credibility and represented the kind of breadth and depth he wanted reflected in his Inaugural Prayer Breakfast. I gave his staff the benefit of the doubt; I agreed to help.

I've never been a big fan of these breakfasts. They began during the Eisenhower era to serve a Christian evangelical purpose among Washington's political elite and are now hosted by politicians of all stripes. Through the decades, as copycat events sprang up in state capitals around the nation, prayer breakfasts have at times morphed into a reflection of the worst of American civil religion, beginning as many do with the Pledge of Allegiance and ending with a rousing chorus of "God Bless

America." Often their purpose is a thinly veiled religious baptism of the party or person coming into power. I've attended many that were filled with more hubris than humility.

So now I had the opportunity to have some input into one of these affairs for a new governor with whom I mostly disagree. What was God up to here?

Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, a congregation that is contending with big egos and conflicted theologies, offers a clue. Throughout the letter, the issue of social status—expressed in terms of comparison with others, boasting and being "puffed up"—is tearing at the very fabric of the Corinthian community. Paul sees that this social hierarchy is rooted in the conflicted parties' misunderstanding of wisdom. For Paul, their concept of wisdom has its roots not in the cross of Christ, but in the social life of the surrounding culture.

How are the Corinthians then to live? In contrast to other leaders in the Corinthian congregation, Paul offers the inadequacies of his own life and witness as an example. It was not Paul's worldly status and gifts that resulted in Corinthian faithfulness, but his weakness, vulnerability and humility. These allowed God's message "of Christ Jesus and him crucified" to be heard and received. It is this wisdom, and not the world's wisdom, that becomes the basis for community formation.

On the basis of my negative experiences with past prayer breakfasts, "humility, not hubris" became my unspoken goal as I helped plan this event. In recent years, some politicians sensitive to the diversity of our religious landscape have muted the evangelical emphasis and broadened the prayer breakfast to include leaders from a variety of traditions. Even in religiously homogeneous Wisconsin, where 80 percent of believers are either Catholic or Lutheran, this seems important. So my first question to the transition team was "Do you want the prayer breakfast to be an interfaith, inclusive affair?" "Yes, indeed!" I was told. This was a good sign, and the main reason I agreed to help.

The National Prayer Breakfast has the stated purpose of "being a forum for political, social and business leaders of the world to assemble together and build relationships which might not otherwise be possible." That's a noble goal for any prayer breakfast, especially in the current political climate.

As a participant in planning the Wisconsin event, I proposed we model this kind of community by seating the interfaith guests upfront. It would require an act of humility on the part of the new political leaders to make these changes, to give their guests dignity and voice instead of allowing them to be only window dressing.

There was lots of horse-trading over who would sit where and who would get to speak, but as it turned out, the breakfast was indeed an interreligious experience. Representatives from Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic and Christian evangelical communities offered prayers. The governor's staff decided, wisely, that there would be no head table; instead, the speakers were seated with the guests on the main floor. When all was said and done, the experience was a mix of hubris and humility.